

Jane Bussman (left) mid-interview with Mischa Barton (not “vacuous”) in LA: her book bemoans the fierce control of Hollywood’s PR gatekeepers.

# Friendly Fire

**BOOKS** → Jane Bussman stopped interviewing vacuous LA celebrities to become a war correspondent in Uganda. And found the two worlds had bizarrely comic parallels

THERE’S A DEFINING MOMENT IN Jane Bussman’s memoir. Her plane lowers itself over the forests of the Congo – “thick with gold and diamonds”, she imagines a feeding frenzy, kings, mercenaries and colonels elbowing each other out of the way – and for the first time in her life she feels she’s doing something useful. She no longer interviews brainless pop idols; she’s a war correspondent. “It was a moment of enlightenment. I didn’t feel like a horrible person.” She’d started out as provider of “off-the-cuff quips” for Radio 1’s Jakki Brambles, then wrote (with Graham Linehan and David Quantick) for *Brass Eye* and Armando Iannucci’s *Armistice*, but

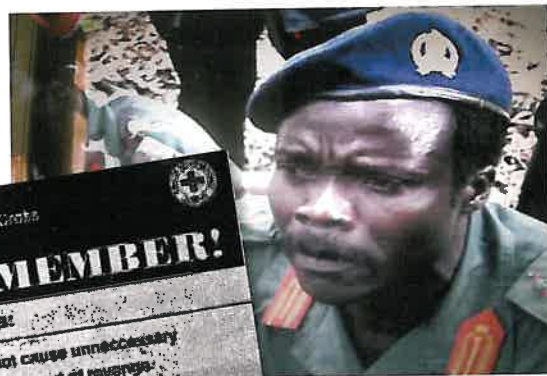
stormed out of a meeting with a head of comedy I can’t possibly name who’d refused to commission her sitcom even though the test audience had loved it – “You can’t go by what the audience think,” he’d confided, “they’re stupid.” She’d then flown to LA to chance her arm as a scriptwriter but was soon sucked into the cesspool of celebrity journalism, churning out shiny, airbrushed pieces for the fashion titles and Sunday supplements back home.

Her savagely comic account of the madness of the West Coast PR industry pulls no punches. “Hollywood,” she writes, “is the worst place in the world. It’s boiling hot and full of cunts.” Viperous gatekeepers retain fascist control of their actor clients and estate agents failing to sell houses can now be sued for “breach of hope”. Everyone she meets seems to be “in the honeymoon cycle of a serotonin reuptake inhibitor, just before they go crazy and hold up a post office”. She sleepwalks through various soul-sapping celebrity encounters, the low points coming thick and fast: could she

interview Geri Halliwell about her “breast cancer fears”? She’s got breast cancer? “No, she just fears it.” But the final straw is the full-length, quote-packed “saucer of sick” she files about a brave but troubled celebrity she’s never actually allowed to meet and barely talks to (Britney Spears, a cover story). And when a London evening paper mangles her quotes from Ashton Kutcher and the lawyers get tough, she flies to Uganda to write a profile of the peace campaigner John Prendergast, the man who got a full minute with George Bush solely because

“It was a real challenge to write jokes about the sickest sick I’d ever seen”

the president thought he was Bono. And here begins the slightly harrowing B-side of the book. She soon learns that post-Amin Uganda is now terrorised by the Lord’s Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, who routinely kidnap and murder schoolchildren, raping and “marrying” the girls and recruiting the boys to their rampaging rebel infantry. Astonishingly, Bussman manages to expose these horrors with the same scale of values she’d applied to LA. On discovering that 39 per



A Red Cross leaflet urging Ugandan soldiers not to “rape, loot or attack civilians”; (left) the elusive LDA leader Joseph Kony; (below) Bussman outside a Kampala rehab centre, possibly dreaming about lip-plumping gel.

